One of the most famous thought experiments ever devised, Schrödinger's cat, envisioned a cat stuck in a box with a vial of poison. The vial of poison is connected to a radioactive particle and will be smashed if the particle decays. After a while, the radioactive particle will be suspended in a superposition where it is simultaneously both decayed and non-decayed. As the state of this particle controls whether the cat is dead or alive, the cat is also in a superposition between life and death.

But how, you may ask, does this hypothetical situation from quantum mechanics have to do with the main focus of this substack - politics? The answer is that, as of the moment I write this, the chance of an early federal election in Canada is currently suspended in a superposition similar to the one Schrödinger's finds itself in. Let me explain.

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How we got here

In March of 2022, just six months after the last Canadian election, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh announced that he was entering his party into a supply-and-confidence agreement with the Liberal government. This pact, intended to last until 2025, locked the NDP into voting with the Liberals on anything deemed to be a confidence vote. In exchange, the Liberals would agree to table legislation addressing core NDP policy priorities, namely Dentalcare and Pharmacare. The result was a de-facto Liberal majority government pursuing an agenda far to the left of most governments throughout Canadian history, and even to the left of the Trudeau government's agenda during its first few years in office.

Despite previous NDP promises of creating sweeping single-payer systems in regard to dental care and Pharmacare, the actual legislation tabled by the Liberal government on both of these fronts was highly targeted in nature. Government-administered dental care will only be offered to lower income brackets and Pharmacare only covers certain medications. Despite this, the NDP continued its dogmatic support for the Liberal government, which included shielding the government from accountability regarding the myriad of scandals the Liberals have found

themselves in over the last few years. Because of the watered-down nature of the benefits the NDP received from the agreement, many (including myself) surmised that the only purpose of the supply-and-confidence agreement was to secure Jagmeet Singh a pension. Singh entered the House of Commons in a February 2019 by-election and needs to remain there for a minimum of six years for a pension to be guaranteed to him. With his chances of being re-elected in his riding looking rather precarious, it seemed safe to assume that he was reluctant to face voters and risk losing his seat before the six-year pension threshold. However, the NDP's abandonment of the agreement forced us to re-evaluate that premise…at least temporarily.

Why we won't have an early election

On June 3, the Pharmacare bill that had been one of the core pillars of the supply-and-confidence agreement passed through third reading stage in the House of Commons and was sent to the Senate. The NDP had gotten everything it wanted out of its pact with the Liberals and just three weeks remained in the parliamentary session before the summer

recess. Over the following summer, the agreement held, although there was nothing that would officially test it. The NDP only officially tore up the agreement less than two weeks before parliament's return in the fall.

With the agreement gone, Pierre Poilievre sought to capitalize on the return of a true minority government and tabled a bare-bones no-confidence motion that was detached from anything that could be deemed to be ideological. And yet……the NDP still voted against the motion! This result cast a light on the naked self-interest that had often propelled the NDP when it has voted with the Liberals, and cast doubt on the notion that the NDP's support for the government hinged on specific policy outcomes. Below I will list out the possible motivations the NDP has in propping up the government now that the supply-and-confidence agreement is gone:

1. I have already mentioned Jagmeet Singh's pension as a reason for the NDP's continued support for the Liberals, and I think the reasoning behind believing it to be a motivator is quite strong. Even with the supply-and-confidence agreement gone, Singh could theoretically vote with the government until February to ensure that he gets his pension. And despite his

socialist pretensions, Singh has shown himself to have a strong materialist bent, and him voting in a certain way to secure material wealth doesn't strike me as implausible.

2. There is also the matter of pensions for the other members of his caucus, which has sometimes been raised in the same breath as Singh's pension. However, I think we can firmly separate the two factors, and the case for other MPs delaying an election to get their pension seems less plausible. This is because of the six NDP MPs first elected in 2019, only one of them stands a realistic chance of losing their seat if an election were held today. Additionally, the NDP pushed back against a Liberal proposal that would have pushed the fixed election date for October 2025 back by a week, which would have secured pensions for those "Class of 2019" MPs.
3. The NDP lacks the funds that would be necessary to properly contest a federal election. This could potentially be a secondary motivating factor, but I doubt it is the primary reason they continue to support the Liberals considering their long-running financial troubles.
4. If an election were held today, the NDP would win just 18 seats in a newly expanded 343-seat House of Commons. This would place them in a distant fourth place, and give them little influence in a Poilievre supermajority government. Although the NDP's current count of 25 seats isn't much better from a raw numbers perspective, the present minority government

situation allows the NDP to hold the balance of power. The NDP caucus must, in theory, enjoy the feeling of importance that this situation gives them, even if the only thing they do in this position is prostrate themselves before the government and act as Liberal backbenchers.

5. A vast ideological gulf exists between the NDP and the Conservatives, and the NDP might genuinely fear the potential actions of a Conservative government. Thus, the NDP seeks to prop up the much more ideologically aligned Liberal government for as long as possible. This is the only one of these factors that involves actual principles as opposed to money or power.

Out of these five factors, only one (Singh's pension) definitively points towards an election occurring any earlier than October 2025. On the other hand, just a single factor (pensions of other MPs) definitively points towards the fixed election date. The other three are more ambiguous in terms of the timing of an election, yet they would probably motivate the NDP to schedule an election later rather than sooner. Based on these factors, an early election looks plausible but not likely. If the chances of an early election were Schrödinger's cat, that cat would appear to be more dead than alive. But there are other factors, which

return the cat - and the chances of an early election - to the state of a superposition.

Why we will have an early election

The countervailing case, that an election will soon be upon us, starts with a man named Gerald Butts, who was Justin Trudeau's Principal Secretary from 2015 to 2019. More specifically, it starts with comments Butts made on *The Bridge* podcast (hosted by former CBC journalist Peter Mansbridge):

> The truth is [minority Parliaments] start like a tight molecule and then they decay depending on the particular configuration of, to torture the metaphor, the atoms. In this case, the arrangement of the political parties. And in this case, you had a pretty obvious alignment between the two centre-left parties that was formalized in an arrangement. Now, I think that the New Democrats have decided that it is no longer in their interest to be part of that arrangement. Or they were bullied by the Conservatives, depending on your partisan perspective. It's a matter of time before this Parliament dissolves. I think that the history

> of minority Parliaments in Canada is that they almost always end in a way that people wouldn't have predicted at the beginning. There's some piece of legislation, there's some conflict, there's some change in the polling, there's some change in the self-interest of the parties involved, and all of a sudden you're in an election. It seems to hit people by surprise. My own view is that the NDP pulling out of this supply and confidence [agreement] means that we are going to have an election sooner than we would have otherwise. That just stands to reason. The base rate probability of an election goes up. If I were a betting man, which I am not, I would say I would circle maybe the last ten days on the calendar in October for the [House of Commons] to fall for a December election.

Butts is absolutely right here. Minority governments are unpredictable, and it's worth taking a look at the courses of recent minority governments to demonstrate this point:

- During the 43rd Parliament, the Conservatives tried unsuccessfully to bring down the government in October 2020 for its handling of the WE Charity scandal. Less than a year

later, Justin Trudeau called a snap election to try to capitalize on his promising poll numbers and win a majority government.

- The 38th Parliament almost ended in May 2005 when then-speaker Peter Milliken broke a tied confidence vote in favour of Paul Martin's Liberal government. The House of Commons, however, ended up voting no-confidence in the government six months later.
- The 40th Parliament started with the attempted formation of an NDP-Liberal-Bloc coalition. This led to Stephen Harper proroguing Parliament for almost two months. Over two years later, this minority Conservative government was found to be in contempt of Parliament and was defeated by all the opposition parties in a confidence vote. However, two of those opposition parties, the Bloc Quebecois and the Liberals, were decimated in the following election, which saw Stephen Harper obtain a coveted majority government.

As you can see, there are always unforeseen factors that lead to the downfall of minority governments. This makes the business of guessing what those factors are rather fraught and unpredictable. However, I still think it is worth attempting to suss out what might possibly trigger a successful vote of no-confidence.

The OAS vote

On October 2, the House of Commons passed a Bloc Quebecois motion that requested a Royal Recommendation for Bill C-319, a Bloc Quebecois private members' bill that seeks to raise the amount of pension (also known as OAS) those over the age of 65 are entitled to by 10%[1].

This passage of the motion came despite 93% of Liberal MPs voting against it (5 Liberal MPs broke ranks and voted in favour, while 6 didn't vote). What was more interesting, however, was that the entire Conservative caucus voted in favour. On the face of it, this seems odd. The pension increases proposed in Bill C-319 will cost $16 billion over the next five years, which seemingly contradicts Conservative support for reduced government spending and balanced budgets. Additionally, spending $16 billion more on pensions would likely require raising taxes on workers and young people, both groups that Pierre Poilievre has claimed to champion. But what makes this vote significant is that all opposition parties voted against the government on a matter related to public spending. As votes related to money are usually assumed to be tests of confidence in the government, the Conservatives might have

been laying the groundwork for a future vote of non-confidence, even if this specific Bloc motion was non-binding.

What also makes this issue of pension increases noteworthy is that the NDP has previously championed proposals to increase OAS, meaning they deem this matter to be of at least some importance. If both the NDP and the Bloc deem this issue to be significant enough to impact their support for the government, we could be in the midst of a federal election very soon. While I doubt the likelihood of this happening, I nevertheless see it as the most likely way the government could fall in a no-confidence vote before October 2025.

Final Thoughts

The Schrödinger's cat experiment is often understood only in terms of the superposition the cat exists in. However, a key element is often left out. This is that after the box in which the cat is located is opened, the cat is either dead or alive and all the ambiguity created by the superposition is erased. Similarly, once the 44th Canadian Parliament is dissolved, all speculation regarding early elections will be erased and

Canada will be plunged into a federal election - either in a year from now or sooner. Once this happens, the events that led to the election will look obvious in hindsight. Yet until that day arrives, Parliament - much like Schrödinger's cat - will exist in a truly ambiguous superposition.

1

Any private members' bills that deal with public expenditures require a Royal Recommendation. Bill C-319, therefore, needed a Royal Recommendation in order to receive a final vote at third reading.